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ABSTRACT

Adults in four North Carolina counties were surveyed to determine public attitudes about the high school minimum competency test (MCT) that determines which students receive a diploma. The interview form consisted of 18 questions with 5-point Likert response scale. Four additional questions requested specific responses. Interviewers were seven educators from the community who received training before collecting the data. They randomly selected homes and interviewed one adult occupant in each. The 150 subjects were predominantly female (n=105) and 95 had children under 18 years of age. The respondents were generally supportive of the MCT, but lacked a clear understanding of its purpose. Overall, the respondents believed that the competency examination was achieving its perceived purpose of enhancing academic achievement and providing incentive for improved performance. The public also supported the use of remedial programs for students who fail the test. Seventy percent of the respondents thought that the mentally retarded and learning disabled should not have to meet the same requirements as non-handicapped students. The respondents believed that the MCT and the Tests of General Educational Development are similar. Respondents also believed that the MCT covered the entire high school curriculum; they did not understand it as requiring only the mastery of basic skills needed to function at a minimum level in society. Three tables present survey results. (SLD)

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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES
TOWARD THE HIGH SCHOOL
MINIMUM COMPETENCY TEST

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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD
THE HIGH SCHOOL MINIMUM COMPETENCY TEST

Minimum competency testing (MCT) for secondary school students is defined as a program mandated by a state or local policy making body. The MCT program has the following characteristics: (1) all students at certain grade level are required to take paper and pencil test designed to measure basic academic skills, life or functional literacy; (2) a standard for acceptable level of student performance has been set: (3) test results may be used to certify for promotion, to place in remediation and to award diplomas.

Gorth and Perkins (1979a, 1979b) report efforts that states have made to evaluate MCT programs. Seven states have conducted some level of evaluation. For example, New Hampshire reviewed materials and interviewed teachers and administrators. The Florida MCT was the subject of a review sponsored by the National Education Association (Tyler, 1978), and the Michigan MCT has been reviewed (House, Rivers and Stufflebeam, 1974). California has used a survey questionnaire for a sample of districts and conducted personal interviews. North Carolina reports pass rates by school, sex, ethnic group, amount of parent education, handicapping condition, and has contracted several studies on the MCT program.

One of the factors behind the minimum competency testing for high school students was the desire to guarantee some standard level of competency upon graduation. It's effects in many

instances is to focus instruction on passing the test. While scores on such tests have improved since the use of the test began, it is not clear that the improvement reflects a higher level of achievement or ability to do better on the minimum competency test (Linn, 1986).

An effect of the minimum competency test is the motivation of secondary schools to find a way to get around it. A study of several local school districts and states that had implemented competency standards concluded that the standards functioned more as symbolic and political gestures than as instruments of reforms (Ellwein, Glass, & Smith, 1988). Once the standards were in place various methods were put in place to catch those who failed to pass the test. These methods included the opportunity to take a test several times, the possibility of taking alternative tests, and the possibility the results being overruled by teachers. In addition, students some were exempted from the test and the standards were lowered by one standard error of measurement. These methods according to the study allowed the schools to point to tough standards while "doing business as usual. In the five sites studied, interest in the test was initially high, but over the time waned.

Although support for the implementation of MCT range from government leaders, educational specialists, teachers and parents little input has been received from the community. Community input in the evaluation of the MCT program is not only important for development of the MCT but needed to determine if the community understands the purpose and rationale behind the program.

In North Carolina the Competency Test Commission was formed to recommend the methods for administering and constructing test items. The student in North Carolina is required to take the MCT in the junior year of high school. The cut off scores set by the Commission are 72 percent current for reading and 64 percent for math. The student must pass both sections of the MCT in order to pass. If the student fails this test he will take the test again in the Spring. If the second test is failed the student is allowed to take the test in the Fall and Spring of his senior year. If the student fails the repeated testing the student will receive a certificate rather than a diploma. Students who are no longer in school but not yet 21 may take the test up to 10 times.

Although the implementation of the MCT receives support from the public, teachers and educational leaders (Pipho, 1978), George (1981) has pointed out several areas of criticism of the North Carolina MCT program. This criticism centers on six basic areas. The first is the requirement that a single test to be used to decide whether a child receives a high school diploma. There is also concern over the test and curriculum match. The cut-off scores are arbitrarily decided often for political rather than educational reasons. There is concern by some teachers that the MCT forces them to concentrate on students who will likely fail the tests and neglect those who will likely pass. Also, there is concern for the personal cost to the children who fail the test in damaged self esteem and permanent discouragement. Children who are minority, handicapped or poor, fail the competency

test more often than other children. There is concern that these children are more likely to drop out of school. These criticisms were the basis for many of the questions asked of individuals in four North Carolina counties to obtain information on the public attitude toward these and other issues pertinent to the MCT program.

PROCEDURE

The interview form consisted of 18 questions on a Likert scale method of measuring attitudes with the response reported on a 5 point scale. The remaining four questions requested specific responses.

Interviews were conducted with 30 adults in Harnett, 48 in Cumberland, 32 in Scotland, and 40 in Roberson counties. The four counties were divided into two areas. The 7 interviewers randomly selected homes in the area by first dividing their area into middle income neighborhoods and lower income neighborhoods. From each of these neighborhoods the interviewers randomly selected an equal number of houses in which one adult occupant was to be interviewed.

The interviewers were educators in the community they interviewed. They were trained by this researchers before collecting any data. In analysis of the result, the data for the four counties were combined and the percentages for each of 6 Likert selections was calculated.

RESULTS

The 150 subjects in the survey consisted of 70 percent (n = 105) female and 30 percent (n = 45) male, with their average age being 30.22 years. Their final grade level achieved was 11.52, with 95 of the 150 subjects having children under 18 years of age.

Tables 1 and 2 contained the response for the Likert method ratings for the 150 adults participating in the study.

Statement 2 and 16 are concerned with the general effect of the minimum competency test on education. On statement 2 the strongly agree and the agree total was 57 percent while for questions 16 the total agreed percentage was 43. The disagree or strongly disagree total was 18 percent for question 2 and 69 percent for question 16. While the statements covered the same topic, the "all students" in 16 probably led to the difference in response. The respondents apparently feel that the minimum competency test is a positive factor for education, but not necessarily a benefit for every student.

Statement 6 and statement 11 are concerned with the question whether a different test should be administered to special students. The difference in the statements is that statement 11 specifically mentions handicapped students. While statement 6 is concerned with the students background. This causes a change from 65 percent agreement to 15 percent agreement that all students take the same exam.

Statements 9 and 18 are concerned with the fairness of denying a diploma based on the competency exam. The wording of the two questions are different, but identical in meaning which resulted in 26% agreement for statement 9 and 38% agreement for statement 18.

Question 19 asked who should decide what should be included on the minimum competency exam. The options provided and results were: Teachers - Principals (23 percent), School Board (8 percent), parents (8 percent), State Government (3 percent), Federal government (1 percent), and all of the above (57 percent). The results indicated little support for Federal or State government alone deciding on the contents of the test.

Table 3 presents the reading and math level that should be required for passing the minimum competency exam. The results provide little public support for either a reading or math requirement below the ninth grade level.

DISCUSSION

According to Serow (1980) one of the major goals of the MCT in North Carolina is to enhance academic achievement and provide incentive for improved performance. According to present findings the public believes that the competency exam is achieving this goal.

The public also supports the use of remedial program for students who fail the test. Serow (1980) studied 1800 students in Eastern North Carolina who failed one or both sections of the competency test. Results indicate that remedial instruction cannot

be expected to produce broadly based gains in student competency test performance. In contrast, Parramore (1980) studied 1731 members of the class of the 1980 in the rural areas of North Carolina. The first part of the study was concerned with the students who failed the test and which ones showed improvement on the second test. White girls and boys showed 97.8 and 95.5 percent passing on the second test after remediation, while 77.8 and 71.0 percent of the black girls and boys passed on the second test after remediation. This provided support for the respondents belief in the remedial program for students who fail the MCT.

The public's opinion of testing requirement for handicapped students are different than for those less advantage background. They feel (63 percent) that regardless of background every child should meet the same requirements. However, they feel (70 percent) handicapped students such as the mentally retarded and learning disabled should not have to take the same test as other students. While North Carolina allows modification in the administration of the exam to handicapped students they are required to take the same exam if they wish to received a diploma.

In Illinois, handicapped students have brought suit (Debra p. v. Illinois State Board of Education, claiming the Peoria School District has violated Public Law 94-142, section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, and the Fourteenth Amendment due process clause in denying the diploma on the basis of local competency test. In New York, a state judge ruled (Northport-East, Northport Union Free

School District v. Ambach) that handicapped students could keep their diplomas although they had failed the MCT ("Illinois Handicapped Students challenge Competency Test", 1981).

According to the present results, the public believes that the (GED) General Equivalency Exam for a high school diploma and the MCT are similar. They agree (54 percent) that all students should be required to pass the GED exam in order to graduate. This along with the support for the basic competency exam indicates the public does not understand the differences between the two exams. The GED being a more comprehensive exam would probably increase the failure rate. Despite this, they did not feel a failure rate of 3 percent indicated the MCT was too easy.

The respondents in the present study feel the students should be achieving on at least a ninth grade level in reading and math with a majority supporting a tenth grade or higher level required for passing the MCT. But there is a difference of opinion of what constitutes minimum competency. The ability to use reading for every day functioning (approximately fourth grade, Chall, 1983) to an eighth grade level for a high school equivalency diploma (Chall, 1983). The NAE Reading Committee (1981) report, Toward a Literate Society, suggests a 12th-grade reading level as needed to read the New York Times or a news magazine such as Time critically and analytically.

Chall, Freeman and Levy (1982) found that the required level of cognitive processing required to answer the questions (from

Bloom's Taxonomy) confirmed that the level of literacy required by these minimum competency tests was characteristic more of the upper elementary grades than of high school. While the lower competency levels allow more students to pass the exam the respondents feel that a higher level is need to be "minimally competent".

In analysis of eight tests of minimums competency in reading for Grade 11 with half developed by state departments of education and half by publishing firms, it was revealed that a wide range of reading ability was required, ranging from 5-6 grade level to a 11-12 grade level, with most requiring about a 7-8 grade level (Chall, Freeman and Levy, 1982). This finding contrasts with the tenth grade level supported by the respondents in the present study.

There is confusion about the purpose of the MCT. The MCT appears to be viewed as an evaluation of the entire high school curriculum. Thus, the public may be led to believe that a high percentage of high school graduates have mastered the high school curriculum. The public needs to be educated to the fact that the success on the MCT requires only the mastery of basic skills thought needed to function at a minimal level in society.

The public's attitude toward the causes of failure on the MCT seem to center on a lack of student motivation (57 percent) and lack of student ability (56 percent). Only 16 percent blame poor teaching or family background. Thus, it appears that the majority

feels the cause for failure lies in the student not in the school or home. Despite this, the respondents feel that the school should be held responsible for every child passing the MCT.

In conclusion, it appears that the respondents are supportive of the MCT program, but appear to lack a clear understanding of it's purpose. It appears from the interviews that the respondents feel the MCT covers the entire content of the high school curriculum rather than just the "survival skills" needed to function in our society. This was indicated by their support of GED as equivalent to the minimum competency test and the high level of math and reading levels that should be demanded of the test. Also, the public while supporting the use of the test in determining if a diploma is to be awarded does not feel the handicapped student should have to take the same test to receive a diploma. This view is in opposition to the present North Carolina policy of requiring all students to demonstrate a mastery of the minimal competencies measurable by the test.

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TABLE 1
Responses to Statements 1 through 9
on The Competency Questionnaire*

	SA		A		N		D		SP	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
1. North Carolina defines minimum competency for graduation to be "Those skills and knowledge necessary to function independently and successfully in assuming the responsibilities of citizenship." Do you agree that this should be the goal of our schools?	40	31	86	57	10	7	6	4	2	1
2. The implementation of minimum competency testing in the North Carolina system as a requirement for graduation had a positive effect on the education students.	15	10	71	47	37	24	25	17	2	1
3. The school system should be held accountable for seeing to it that <u>every</u> child meets the minimum competencies for graduation.	42	28	56	37	12	8	38	25	2	1
4. A student who fails the minimum competency test should be able to take the test as <u>many</u> times as he or she needs in order to obtain a passing score.	30	20	90	60	1	1	11	7	18	20
5. Students who fail the test are given remedial classes to help them develop those skills and knowledge needed to acquire a passing grade. Do you agree with this policy?	53	35	85	57	6	04	6	04	0	0
6. All students, no matter what their background, should be required to pass the same test.	29	19	66	44	17	11	34	23	4	03
7. Students presently in school should be required to pass the same test as those adults trying to obtain a diploma through the GED program.	20	13	69	46	23	15	27	18	11	07
8. In the state of North Carolina only three percent of all students taking the test do not eventually make a passing score. This implies that the test is too easy.	5	03	24	17	29	19	80	54	12	08
9. A school should not be allowed to withhold a diploma from a student because of his or her failure on the minimum competency test.	7	05	32	21	15	10	81	54	16	11

* Rounded to nearest percentage

TABLE 2

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Responses to Statements 10 through 18
on Competency Questionnaire

QUESTIONS	SA		A		N		D		SD	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
10. If students can pass the minimum competency test in the eleventh grade, when they are first given the test, they should be allowed to graduate at that time.	9	06	29	19	16	11	64	43	32	21
11. Handicapped students such as the mentally retarded, and learning disabled should be expected to pass the same competency exam as the non handicapped.	0	0	23	15	21	14	69	46	36	24
12. Failure on the minimum competency exam is due to poor teaching.	1	01	23	15	27	18	69	45	30	20
13. Failure on the minimum competency exam is due to low motivation on student's part.	12	08	74	49	34	23	27	18	3	02
14. Failure on the minimum competency exam is due to low ability of student.	3	02	54	36	38	25	48	32	7	05
15. Failure on the minimum competency exam is due to the students family background.	1	01	23	15	18	12	87	57	21	14
16. Minimum Competency exams will promote learning in all students.	11	07	48	32	23	15	63	42	6	04
17. Students who fail to pass the minimum competency exam will be handicapped in their search for employment.	14	09	69	46	23	15	40	27	4	03
18. It is unfair to deny a full diploma to students who meet all requirements except passing the competency exam.	15	09	43	29	21	14	60	40	10	07

TABLE 3

Reading and Math Level
Requirement for passing the Minimum Competency Exam

GRADE LEVEL		6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Reading	Number	4	2	14	39	46	25	20
	Percentage	3	1	9	26	31	16	13
Math	Number	2	2	16	30	41	25	22
	Percentage	1	1	11	21	29	18	16